

REPORT  
FROM THE  
INSPECTORATE

**Good Practice  
Report**

**December 1996**

***Provision for  
Students with  
Learning Difficulties  
and/or Disabilities***

THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL

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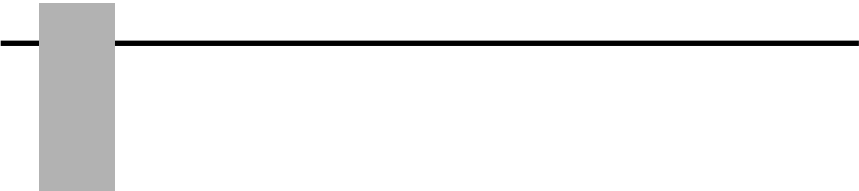
***THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
FUNDING COUNCIL***

*The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.*

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## INTRODUCTION

1 Before the incorporation of colleges on 1 April 1993, provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities varied significantly from college to college and from one local education authority to another, in size, quality, range, and in the commitment and effectiveness with which it was managed. In some colleges, provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was included in all aspects of strategic planning, whilst in others it was managed by individuals who were isolated from the main structure and practices of the college. This variation was particularly evident in courses that were designed specifically to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties.

2 Since incorporation, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has worked with the sector to raise both the standards and the status of provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The FEFC has:

- introduced a funding methodology designed to reflect the costs of the additional support needed by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- established an independent committee to review provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and to make recommendations to the FEFC on the ways in which it might be improved
- appointed a small national team of specialist inspectors and provided, through the inspectorate and its reports, the first systematic evaluation of the quality of this provision in further education sector colleges and independent colleges and establishments.

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3 Inspection evidence gathered over the period 1993 to 1996 shows that despite the significant changes and progress made, much still remains to be done. The quality of work in this area has been judged by inspectors to be lower than the average for other areas of provision.

4 For the purpose of this report, students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are taken to include those with learning difficulties; physical disabilities including mobility difficulties which affect their learning or their access to learning; mental health difficulties; visual and/or hearing impairments; emotional and/or behavioural difficulties; profound/complex disabilities; and temporary disabilities caused by illnesses or accidents. These broad categories are drawn from the research carried out for the FEFC's learning difficulties and/or disabilities committee chaired by Professor John Tomlinson, and are useful only insofar as they help us to understand who is included in the phrase 'students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities'. Once students are in college, the focus should not be the student's disability or learning difficulty, but on what this means for the way in which students learn, and the educational environment needed to meet the individual's learning goals.

5 This report is designed to contribute to the continuing process of improving the quality of provision in the sector by recognising and sharing the good practice identified by inspectors. The report is intended for:

- staff who specialise in working with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- staff from other curriculum areas, whose students include those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- managers of departments or colleges which make provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

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6 As well as identifying and disseminating good practice, the positive features described in the report should help colleges to carry out an audit of their provision, and indicate ways in which they might seek to improve it. The report has the following structure:

- key features underpinning successful provision
- a more detailed analysis of good practice in teaching and learning, including examples drawn from a variety of colleges across the country
- the organisation and management of provision
- checklists to enable staff and managers to consider their college's current provision and to identify areas in which further development is required.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FEATURES UNDERPINNING SUCCESSFUL PROVISION

7 The following features are those most frequently associated with successful provision:

- a clearly-documented curriculum framework which provides a rationale and a logical structure for all teaching and learning activities
- identification of an overall goal for each student which indicates what that student aims to do on leaving college
- analysis of the skills and concepts the students will need to achieve their overall goal
- assessment, on entry to the college, of students' strengths and needs within the context of their overall goal
- the development of an individual programme for each student which specifies the overall goal, the steps needed to achieve the goal and how progress will be monitored

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- access to specialist teaching and specialist support from trained and qualified staff who are skilled in devising teaching and learning strategies which enable students who have disabilities or difficulties in learning to achieve success in their programmes
  - opportunities for students to learn the skills and concepts identified within their individual programmes through practical activities, using equipment which is of an appropriate standard, and accommodation which is appropriate for the task being taught
  - regular checks to ensure that students are learning, at an appropriate rate, the knowledge, skills and understanding which have been specified within their programmes
  - opportunities for students to develop the skills they need to gain employment and function as members of the community
  - senior managers who are actively involved in developing an approach to education which recognises that all students are considered to be of equal value and have equal entitlements to extend their knowledge and skills and to be included in the full range of student activities
  - a rigorous system for monitoring the quality of students' experience in the college and their achievements
  - training opportunities for staff which will enable them to extend their understanding of the impact that learning difficulties and/or disabilities have on their students' learning and to develop effective teaching and learning strategies in response to students' needs.

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## GOOD PRACTICE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

8 Much of what constitutes good practice in the teaching of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is, not surprisingly, the same as for any other form of teaching. For example, effective sessions have:

- content which is relevant to the students and to the course
- clear links with what has been learned previously and what will be learned
- specific aims and objectives that are shared with the students, and understood and accepted by them
- clearly-stated outcomes which are identified in advance and monitored both during and at the end of a lesson
- teaching and learning materials that are relevant, well designed and well produced
- opportunities for students to participate in activities.

9 As for all students, a good programme of study for a student with a learning difficulty and/or disability introduces content that is relevant to the student's age, stage in life, and any particular needs or interests. It identifies clearly the rationale behind each learning activity and what it is designed to achieve in relation to the student's overall goal. For students with learning difficulties, a successful programme is most likely to emphasise practical experience rather than paper-based activities, and learning in real situations rather than simulated ones. The design of the programme strikes the right balance between the development of practical skills and understanding, and the development of basic skills such as literacy



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and numeracy. As much as possible, it sets basic skills within a ‘real’ context of specific personal needs or vocational concerns. It also ensures that students have access to specialist accommodation such as vocational workshops and ‘real work’ environments.

In a general further education college, each student with a learning difficulty and/or disability had an individual programme which specified what the student was hoping to achieve on leaving college and identified the skills he or she needed to develop to achieve his or her goal. This information was shared with all the teachers and support staff who worked with the student. The staff then made sure that they took account of these objectives when they were planning their lessons. For example, the teacher of an advanced level photography class had planned a lesson to include specific learning opportunities for a student who had learning and emotional difficulties. The teacher devised a particular role for the student which enabled him, with help from his support worker, to undertake some of the practical tasks associated with the role of a technician. These tasks were linked directly to the objectives within the student’s individual programme such as working helpfully with others and following instructions.

10 Teaching is most effective when staff have the same high expectations of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as of any other student; when the standards the students are expected to achieve are applied with the same rigour; and where students, after appropriate preparation, are expected to be able to cope fully with the tasks set, and not with a simplified version that leaves out any ‘tricky bits’.

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Students with severe learning difficulties were observed working in a college's bistro which was open to the public. The students were expected to take a full part in the preparation and serving of food. They were smartly dressed in appropriate uniforms and carried out their duties competently and professionally. The lecturer expected the students to work hard and to achieve good results. Several former students had gained nationally-recognised catering qualifications and had gone on to employment within the catering industry.

11 It is important that the content of lessons and the approaches used give full recognition to the adult status of the students, and that staff avoid inappropriate terminology such as 'lads' or 'good girls'. It is also important that work is designed to minimise dependency on the teacher, and encourage students to take increasing responsibility for their learning. This can be done by ensuring, for example, that the information and materials that the students need for their work are in a format and style that they can use easily, without being childish in appearance.

Students were observed in a cookery class which formed part of an independent living skills programme. The students had severe learning difficulties and most were unable to read. The lecturers had taped the instructions for each task on audio cassettes, and the students were able to work on their own at a speed which suited them by listening to the tapes on personal stereo equipment provided by the college. The students were able to borrow the tapes so that they could practise the recipes at home.

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12 Careful planning is a characteristic of the best teaching sessions. The structure and sequence in which skills and concepts are to be taught will have been carefully thought out, and attention will have been given to the amount of learning in any one session. In this way, staff ensure that students are not overloaded with information, that there is no risk of confusion arising from too many learning points, and that there is sufficient opportunity for students to assimilate what is being taught. In the best lessons, teachers use a variety of approaches to promote interest and maintain concentration, and they make certain that sessions offer an element of challenge for each student. Teaching methods are chosen with the students' particular learning styles and requirements in mind. The methods used ensure that students have every opportunity to think for themselves; verbal messages are reinforced visually and through doing, rather than through an over-reliance on the written word. Teachers recognise that some students need an individual approach, for instance, a slower pace for a student with low energy levels, or tasks broken into smaller steps for a student with limited ability to concentrate.

13 Teaching and learning are most effective where staff are skilled at providing differentiated activities which enable students with differing requirements and abilities to work in the same group and develop the same range of skills or knowledge, but at an appropriate level. Successful teachers are adept at breaking down tasks into achievable steps, or finding ways to help students understand difficult concepts. They show considerable imagination and creativity in adapting ideas, materials and tasks to help students learn in the most effective ways. They also recognise that students may have had an adverse experience of more traditional teaching methods and do all that they can to take account of this in organising the work.

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A student with severe learning difficulties following a bakery course was observed in a theory session. The student was unable to read and the tutor had prepared a range of visual teaching materials to help her to understand the theory part of the course. Her responses were carefully recorded and her understanding checked throughout the session.

14 Wherever possible, good teachers find ways to enrich and reinforce students' learning, for example, through visits and visitors, projects and work experience. They also make full use of the possibilities offered by information technology in the classroom, and give students every opportunity to develop their skills and to use information technology in presenting their work to best effect.

In one college, an innovative Internet project had been developed for students with physical disabilities who lived at home. The students attended classes at the college to learn how to use the information technology equipment and to develop their keyboard skills. They were then loaned the equipment to use at home and given an allowance for telephone calls to access the Internet. A helpline was established so that students could contact staff for support, and a tutor visited students at home if necessary. Some of the students involved in the project used the Internet to undertake research or to pursue a particular interest, whilst others used it for commercial initiatives which they hoped might develop into employment.

15 It is important that the right support is available to assist students' learning. This may mean using specific learning aids or providing support staff to help students. Where additional support staff are available, the teaching methods used in the session should ensure that they can contribute to maximum effect; in the most

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effective sessions, support staff play a full part in planning the help they will give. In the best practice, specialist teachers will be available to help students with particular learning difficulties and/or disabilities such as dyslexia or hearing impairment who have difficulty with some of the concepts being learnt or who find the language demanding.

In a sixth form college, a student with dyslexia was observed receiving individual support from a specialist teacher. The work undertaken by the student over the past week was reviewed and great care was taken to ensure that the student understood the language and the concepts used. The student was helped to organise the work in his files and was taught specific strategies to overcome some of the difficulties he had with spelling. The student was loaned a laptop computer with a spellcheck facility to use at home to do his assignments.

A vocational information technology class which included a number of deaf students was taught by a specialist teacher of the deaf and an information technology specialist working in partnership. The lesson had been planned carefully to ensure that both members of staff were clear about their roles and were able to participate fully throughout the lesson. Careful thought had been given to the language used in the handouts to ensure that the deaf students could understand the instructions.

16 Good practice means providing appropriate opportunities for students to enjoy and consolidate newly-acquired skills before they move on to others. Staff regularly check and reinforce learning, assess the progress made and help students to understand how they can improve their work. Coursework is valued by staff and students; it is marked, discussed and displayed. Students are given time and help to organise their files, prepare their portfolios or maintain

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records of achievement. Students understand the criteria that staff use in assessing their work; they are encouraged to prepare for reviews by assessing their progress for themselves. Students are aware of the progress they are making; staff keep systematic records and regularly review achievements with them.

As part of their assessment, students following a horticultural course were videoed carrying out practical tasks. The video recording was used to help them to assess their own performance and to identify ways in which they could improve it. Video recordings were also used to provide evidence of their work for accreditation purposes. Students were given a personal copy of the video which was updated throughout the course. They were encouraged to show the video to members of their families in order to demonstrate the progress they were making.

17 It is essential that comprehensive and useful records are kept of students' progress, not only in areas of skills, knowledge and understanding but also in relation to personal and social development. The best records are not simply descriptive; they analyse the progress made and contribute to the setting of new targets.

In one college, learning support workers filled in forms at the end of each session to record what each of the students receiving support had done and what progress had been made in relation to the specific objectives in their learning agreements. This information was then passed to the students' personal tutors who used it to review students' progress with them in tutorials.

18 Where thought has been given to these aspects of provision, students work hard and enjoy the challenges set for them. They are rightly proud of their achievements and eager to tackle new work.

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They work together effectively in pairs or small groups, supporting and encouraging each other. Working relationships between staff and students are positive and productive.

Students on an amenity horticulture course had undertaken an impressive horticultural project involving hard and soft landscaping of a disused site. They had also replanted the garden of the local cathedral which had been destroyed during building works. These major projects had enabled the students to gain nationally-recognised qualifications and had greatly enhanced their chances of gaining paid employment.

19 Where provision is effective, there are examples of students progressing to higher levels of study or to employment. Planning for accreditation and progression is built in realistically from the start, and students are encouraged to review their goals periodically in the light of the learning achieved.

Several of the students observed in a hairdressing class had started their studies in a basic level group specifically for students with learning difficulties but had moved on to join national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 1 programmes; they had undertaken successful work experience placements and some had achieved units at NVQ level 2. A student in another group had progressed from achieving units accredited through the Open College Network to NVQ level 2 in under two years.

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## ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT OF PROVISION

20 Colleges which have the most successful provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are those which have worked closely with external agencies to identify the provision needed within the community. This formal 'needs analysis' takes into account the employment opportunities in the areas served by the college and enables the college to run programmes that teach students the skills they require to gain employment. Collaboration also supports long-term strategic planning at local level and helps to ensure that the resources available to the various agencies are used efficiently and effectively.

21 Colleges with the most effective provision ensure that the courses are structured so that students can progress from basic levels to more advanced levels as their skills and confidence increase. Vocational programmes at pre-foundation and level 1 are important elements of good provision. They need to be taught by staff who are both skilled in the subject area and knowledgeable about the ways in which students' learning difficulties and/or disabilities affect their learning. These programmes need the most skilled and experienced staff, not people with the best of intentions but little expertise. Effective provision is found in those colleges which are realistic about what they can offer and do not attempt to offer programmes for which they do not have the necessary expertise.

22 Provision is most successful in colleges where senior managers provide strong, effective leadership, are knowledgeable about the work, committed to developing an 'inclusive' approach to education in which all students are perceived to be of equal value, and demand the same level of rigour as they do for any other area of provision. Responsibility for students with learning difficulties and/or



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disabilities is shared by the college as a whole and not allowed to rest solely with a specialist department. Often, where there is provision of high quality, it is supported by a policy which staff from all departments have developed. The policy is used to spell out the college's philosophy in relation to its provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and to provide a framework for the development of the provision. Care is taken to ensure that the provision is co-ordinated across the college by: establishing clear roles and responsibilities; identifying 'named' people in each department or faculty to act as the contact person for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; and providing sufficient time for the co-ordination of the provision.

23 Where students are taught in groups which are solely or mainly for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, successful colleges give careful thought to what they are taught. A detailed curriculum framework provides a rationale and a coherent structure for all teaching and learning activities. It ensures that students have opportunities to learn skills which are relevant to them. It enables them to build on their strengths; they are not required to concentrate solely on their weaknesses. Students are taught the skills of self-advocacy and encouraged to express their opinions and to exercise choice. Managers recognise that it is not good practice to provide programmes which only occupy or amuse the students, or programmes which are built solely around the interests of staff.

24 A crucial aspect of successful provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is that the students have access to specialist advice and guidance prior to their entry to college so that they are placed on the most appropriate programme. Care is taken to help each student identify what he or she aims to do on leaving college. This is followed by careful assessment of the student's existing knowledge and skills in relation to their overall

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goal. From the information provided by the assessment, staff draw up an individual programme to build on the student's strengths and to address any specific weaknesses. The programme identifies objectives towards the achievement of the skills and knowledge which students will need to achieve their goals. It is important that this is shared fully with all members of staff so that they can incorporate the objectives into their teaching. Students' progress is then monitored in relation to these objectives and the programme is altered as necessary.

25 Colleges offering good provision recognise the importance of specialist support for students with specific impairments or learning difficulties. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing have access to teachers of the deaf, as well as communicators or support assistants. Support for students with dyslexia comes from staff who have appropriate qualifications, not just through the general support services the college provides for students who require support in basic skills. Specialist assessments are used to identify the equipment students might need in order to participate fully in their programmes, and care is taken to ensure that the equipment is available in college from the start of the students' programmes.

26 Effective colleges monitor the quality of their provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities with the same rigour as they do their other provision. Quality assurance systems focus on students' experience to monitor the quality of teaching and learning and to identify good practice which can be shared with others. Students are asked to comment on the quality of their programmes and the support services offered by the college. This may require more time and effort than with other students but is just as important and provides learning opportunities for the students as well as the college. Standard performance indicators such as achievement, retention and progression rates are used to monitor the

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effectiveness of the programmes and to inform future planning. Colleges recognise the value of providing appropriate staff development for teachers and support workers throughout the college. They also ensure that staff development activities focus on helping staff to understand how particular learning difficulties and/or disabilities affect students' learning and on developing effective teaching and learning strategies to overcome them.

## CHECKLISTS

27 The following questions are designed to encourage discussion amongst college managers and teaching staff about good practice.

### **Teachers of courses which are designed specially or mainly for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities**

How do you identify at enrolment or induction an overall goal for a student's programme which takes into account what the student hopes to do on completion of the course?

How far does the course provide content that is relevant to the students now and in the next stage of their lives?

How do you ensure that students enjoy their studies and build on their strengths?

Does the course provide accreditation which is nationally recognised, and which supports rather than determines the student's learning programme?

How do you take into account, in your planning and delivery, the impact that students' learning difficulties and/or disabilities have on their learning?

What do you do to ensure that students find each lesson interesting and challenging?

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Are you aware of each student's overall individual programme and do your lessons have specific objectives for individual students?

How do you break tasks down into manageable steps to ensure that students experience success?

Do you have high and realistic expectations of your students? What do you do to encourage students to accept some responsibility for their own learning and to use their initiative?

Is there an over-reliance in your sessions on 'whole group' activities? Is there too much emphasis on the written word, particularly for students with poor literacy skills?

How do you ensure that students with learning difficulties are provided with learning materials which are appropriate and relevant to adults rather than young children?

How do you incorporate the teaching of literacy and numeracy into practical and vocational lessons so that students can see the relevance of the work?

How do you use information technology to support students' learning?

How do you ensure that students acquire skills through real rather than simulated activities?

Do you plan your sessions so that support staff can make an effective contribution? How far are they involved in planning the session; how do you ensure that the students' ability to learn for themselves is not affected by too much support?

How do you monitor and record students' progress against the objectives within their individual programmes? How do you help students to assess their own work and that of their peers? How do you ensure that students understand the criteria against which their work is being assessed?

How do you help students to develop records of achievement and portfolios of evidence which will be useful to them when they leave college or move to another course?

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**Teachers of general further education courses whose groups include one or more students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities**

How have you modified the planning and delivery of your teaching programmes and sessions to take account of the ways in which students' learning difficulties and/or disabilities affect their learning?

Whom can you contact within the college for advice about effective teaching strategies?

Whom can you contact if you identify that a student needs additional learning support?

How do you make sure that all students participate in lesson activities? What strategies do you adopt to cater for the different levels of ability within the group?

Within each teaching session, do you set specific objectives for each student with a learning difficulty and/or disability? How do you ensure that these contribute to the student's overall goal?

How do you plan your sessions to make best use of the help provided by support staff? How do you ensure that support staff are aware of the structure of the lesson and the goals for their students?

What steps have you taken to identify students who need additional support in basic skills? Have you informed the tutors who provide learning support about the specific basic skills the students require if they are to complete their courses successfully?

How well do you maintain contact with learning support tutors to check students' progress? Do you provide feedback about the impact that the support is having on students' progress in your sessions?

**Senior managers**

In what ways have you demonstrated your commitment to valuing all students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and enabling them to achieve their potential?

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Does the strategic plan contain proposals relating to the college's provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities? If it does, are these reflected in the business plans of faculties or departments across the college?

Do you demand the same level of rigour for this area of work as for any other within the college? What performance indicators do you set?

Which member of the senior management team has responsibility for provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities? Who is responsible for drawing up the college disability statement?

To what extent does the college work with external agencies to identify the provision required to meet needs within the community and to develop provision accordingly?

Does a member of the corporation board have a designated responsibility for this area of provision?

Is there a policy for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities which outlines the college's philosophy and specifies procedures to implement the policy? To what extent is it supported across the college?

Is there a 'cross-college' working party or committee with representatives from each faculty or department to debate issues relating to the college's provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?

Are the roles and responsibilities of staff clearly defined?

What progression routes are open to students as their skills and confidence increase? How do you monitor students' progression?

Is there a range of pre-foundation and foundation level vocational programmes?

How are data relating to students' achievements and destinations used to evaluate programmes and inform future planning?

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What staff development opportunities are provided to enable all teachers and support workers to understand the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?

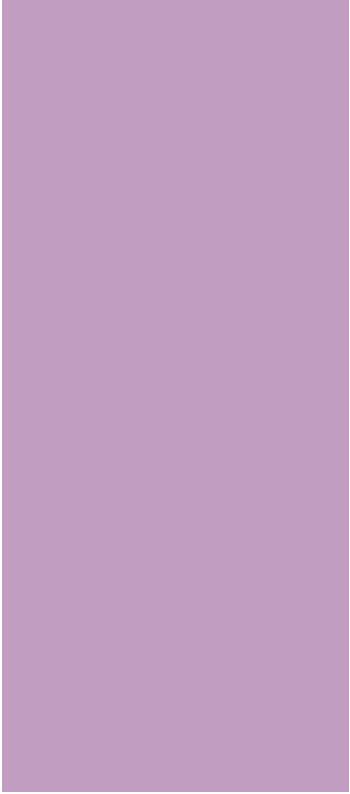
What opportunities are there to share good practice in teaching and learning strategies?

Do teachers of programmes solely or mainly for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have appropriate qualifications and experience? How do you ensure that the staff keep in touch with current practice in general further education programmes?

Do all students have equal access to relevant equipment?

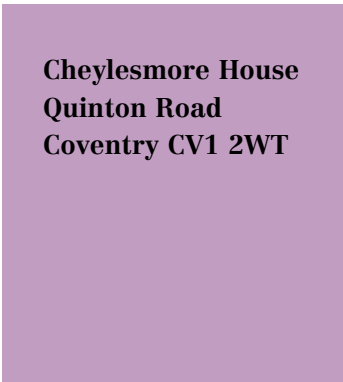
Do students have the opportunity to learn practical vocational skills within 'real work' environments?

Does the accommodation strategy include plans to improve access and facilities for students with mobility difficulties and/or sensory impairments?



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